



Albuquerque International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is the world's largest hot air ballooning event. It all started in 1972 with sixteen balloons gathered in a large open field behind a shopping center. In February 1973 the First World Hot Air Balloon Championship was held at the New Mexico State Fairgrounds. Over 100 balloons from all over the world competed. At that time there were only about 200 hot air balloons registered in the United States. In 1981 over 450 hot air balloons attended a ten-day extravaganza that attracted 250,000 spectators.

We've been at every Fiesta. At first, we just came to watch, but even then Judy and I had to be close. When the First World Hot Air Ballooning Championship was held in Albuquerque in 1973, all the balloons were launched from the fenced center of the racetrack on the fairgrounds. The spectators were supposed to stay in the grandstand or at least behind the fence around the racetrack. We obeyed the rules the first day, but I wanted to see how these things operated, so the next day we crawled through a hole in the fence and walked closer. No one told us to leave, so we spent the rest of the mornings watching the launch from the middle of the action.

Soon after that, the Balloon Fiesta moved from February to October and was held at a large open field on the north edge of the city. Spectators were welcome and they came in droves to mix right in with the balloons and the chase crews. We wandered around with the rest of them and my fascination with hot air balloons grew. As a spectator you can either stand

around with your mouth open or you can help. We helped. At first it wasn't very much, mainly because we were scared to touch anything. Once in a while someone would hand you a storage bag to put in a truck or ask you to put some weight on a gondola. We quickly learned to pick things up or put them down when told. Each day we would pick out a balloon, follow it on its flight and when it landed help pack it up. Gradually we learned more and more about ballooning.

As I look back, I can see the Balloon Fiestas kept a spark of interest alive and, along with almost weekly flights of balloons over the city, gradually fanned it into a flame over a period of several years. In 1978 and 1979 we were on the chase crew for George's balloon. Now, in 1980 I was at the Fiesta to fly my own balloon. I had worked hard for the privilege. The Fiesta rules required each pilot have a minimum of thirty-five hours of flying experience. We had purchased Sundancer in November 1979, and the deadline for registration for the 1980 Fiesta was May 15th. I had to work weekdays and by the time bad weather had canceled out several weekends of flying, getting in enough hours before the deadline was touch-and-go.

The Fiesta was held during the first full week in October. The first Saturday and Sunday of the Fiesta were mass ascensions. This meant that all the balloons attending the Fiesta would be inflated and launched within a short period of time, filling the sky with a panorama of balloons. We knew the Fiesta would draw a huge crowd, so we had to be on the field well ahead of them or we wouldn't get in. The chase crew met us at the house at 5 A.M. and we were stuck in traffic by 5:15. The early start still paid off because we made it to the field by 5:45. The stove in the old motor home was perking coffee, but I was too excited to sit inside. It was still dark and the air had a cold bite. I pulled my coat tighter around my shoulders.

"How many cars do you suppose are stacked up out there?" Judy asked as she walked over to the pickup. I looked around at the roads coming into the field. They were all filled with unbroken chains of lights that undulated like snakes in and out of the small gullies which crisscrossed the launch field.

"Oh, I imagine several thousand. I'm sure glad we got an early start. Dawn's starting to crack and anyone not on the the field by now won't make the launch."

"The dawn patrol is getting ready," Aaron pointed over Laurlie's shoulder. Aaron was Laurlie's steady boy friend and a regular on the crew by now.

Dawn patrols were unusual in New Mexico and were usually reserved for special events like the Fiesta. Normally, hot air balloons do not fly at night because of the danger of not being able to see trees or power lines clearly when they decide to land. It is feasible to take off in the darkness just before dawn, and then to fly long enough to let the sun rise before landing. Three balloons were inflating for this flight. Two were standing up and the third was a black mound barely discernible against the dark sky. The blue flame from a burner shown faintly through the fabric as the pilot fed heat into the envelope and it rose up to join the other two.

After several more minutes the three balloons rose from the ground together. As they ascended and melted into the background of the night sky, each balloon lowered two lights below the gondola to mark its position for any aircraft flying in the area. Suddenly the envelope on one balloon lit up like a giant bulb as the pilot adjusted the burner to cast a yellow flame. As the flame on one balloon winked off, another one flashed on to take its place. Soon the three balloons were blinking like twinkle lights on a Christmas tree. The patterns on each balloon painted bright images in the velvet blue-black backdrop, and when they winked into darkness my mind retained the image like a brief glimpse of magic to return suddenly again as another burner was lit.

"That would be fun," Judy remarked as she cupped hands around a hot cup of coffee. "The view from up there has got to be fantastic. The freeway must be a river of light."

We watched until the balloons became small dots in the sky. I glanced back toward the east. The Sandia Mountains stood out as a jagged black outline against a soft blue background. Yellow tinged the bottom of some light clouds visible over the crest of the mountains. In the short time we had been watching the dawn patrol, darkness had started to retreat. A low dust layer hugged the ground and groups of people hurried by talking in hushed tones.

I tipped my cup up and drained the last few drops. "We'd better head for the pilot's briefing." I drove the truck to our

assigned spot on the launch field, and Judy and I walked toward a group of lights off to one side of the field. Even at this early hour we had to weave our way among the crowd of people. A pilot's briefing was held each morning on the weather conditions and anything else pertinent for the day's flight plans. A crowd of pilots greeted each other as old friends recognized one another. Someone shoved a doughnut into my hand. A feeling of excitement ran through the group as the balloonmeister stepped up to the microphone.

"Welcome to the 1980 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. I have several items to cover this morning."

First, he read the usual greeting from the governor; then the mayor gave a short speech. Then it was time for safety reminders and the weather report. We listened intently. Finally a helium weather balloon was released and rose into the sky. It drifted south for a while as it gained altitude, then changed direction and started to drift north. A cheer rose from the crowd.

"There you have it, folks," the balloonmeister announced. "The famous New Mexico box."

He was referring to a phenomenon typical of this area of the country. The heavier cold air in the Rio Grande Valley tends to flow downstream, or south, in the early morning. However, at a higher altitude the normal seasonal flow of air is toward the north, or up the valley. This meant that as the balloons took off, we would drift south and then when we climbed in altitude we would head back north over the field. Once we had cleared the field we could descend and head back south again in a box pattern. The spectators would be treated to a sight which was rare anywhere else.

We headed back to the pickup. We had borrowed Aaron's pickup because it was yellow and John Sena, our friendly banker, and his son had painted the name "Sundancer" on the side of the pickup bed and a picture of the balloon on each door. Each of the crew members wore a yellow jacket with a picture of the balloon silk screened on the back and a yellow T-shirt with the same picture silk screened on the front. The crew grouped around the truck stood out like a patch of yellow daisies.

"It looks like a perfect morning," I called as we got closer to the group. "Let's get ready to go."

"Where do you want to lay out?" Phil asked.

"We can put the gear together, but we can't lay out yet. We're in the second wave."

The field was laid out in a grid of large squares for launch sites. Each site was numbered, with three balloons assigned to each site. We would launch from this site throughout the entire week. During the mass launches the balloons assigned to each site would inflate and launch, one after the other. The launching would be tightly controlled. The first wave of balloons on each site would inflate; and then the entire wave of balloons would be launched, starting from the downwind side, by launch directors moving through the field and timing each take off so there was minimum danger to everyone.

The balloon ahead of us was assembled and the crew started the cold inflation. Soon, we could hear the roar of the inflator motors and voices calling instructions on all sides of us. We pulled the gondola off the truck, put everything together, attached the cables from the envelope, but left the envelope in the storage bag, and then looked around.

Most of the balloons in the first wave were already standing. The sun had just topped the crest of the mountain. The rays of the sun formed halos around the dark silhouettes of the balloons to the east and made the colors on the balloons to the west so intense they almost hurt your eyes. The morning shadows outlined each detail in sharp relief. The rows of balloons extended in all directions like a garden planted with giant children's tops. Even though there were thousands of people, the rainbow of colors drew my eyes upward until I felt alone and almost suspended above the ground. Judy touched my shoulder and I looked down to see tears brimming in her eyes.

"I've seen it nine years now and I still choke up," she managed.

"Don't worry, Babe. I feel the same way. Look around at the rest of the crew. They're all standing around with their mouths open. If it was raining, they'd all drown!"

Off to one side was an orange balloon with elaborate thirty foot unicorns set into the fabric. Three sites over, a huge jack-o-lantern grinned at me. Another balloon looked like a big

bubblegum machine and still another like a circus tent. In between were balloons with bands and stripes and zigzags of all different colors, each reflecting the personalities of their owners. The spaces between the balloons were crowded with people, milling around with their heads tilted back. In the distance a large yellow balloon with the New Mexico Zia sun symbol drifted into the sky. A smoke bomb dangled from the gondola and red smoke traced a crazy pattern against the blue sky. Far down the field a row of balloons lifted off and then another and another.

I called to the crew to get ready. Aaron and John grabbed the bag and spilled the fabric in a long ribbon along the ground, occasionally asking people to please move out of the way. Six crew members stationed themselves down each side of the envelope to ward off the crowd. I knew no one would intentionally step on the envelope, but in the excitement people tend to forget where they are walking. I had already seen one person walk right into the side of a pickup. The first wave balloon on our site launched into the kaleidoscope forming in the sky and then the row behind us drifted overhead.

"Phil, start the inflator. The rest of you watch the people and move them back as you need to."

Judy and I walked down the length of the balloon by the members of our crew. Charlotte and Roy had been with us since my first flying lesson. John Sena had made our purchase of Sundancer possible. Aaron stood proudly with Laurlie. Keith, Dot and several other friends who had chased for Sundancer at various times were gathered around. Kevin stood at the crown and Philip grinned at me over the inflator at the other end. I wanted to hug each one of them as I went by, but there wasn't time. Related or not, each was part of a family who had worked together and was about to see their hot air balloon fly as part of the greatest balloon festival on earth.

People were everywhere, watching our every move. As I prepared to heat the envelope, a man took pictures of the flame shooting into the interior. When the envelope stood up, people surged in and crowded around the gondola. The small children were special. The wonder of it all shown on their faces and laughter filled the air. Several people held out souvenir programs to be signed. I smiled like I was an old hand at all of

this and sat on the edge of the basket answering questions. I must admit my ego was as inflated as the balloon; I felt great. Around us was another mass of swaying colors ready to float away.

"Dad, your wave is starting to launch." Kevin pointed downwind where the balloons were once again drifting off the field.

A man in a black and white striped jacket came walking toward the gondola and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

I bounced a couple of times to test the buoyancy and nodded. He spoke into a two-way radio and then stepped back to look up. Once he was sure the area above was clear, he raised both hands above his head and touched his palms together. I fed heat into the envelope and we drifted slowly away from the ground. The correct procedure is to ascend slowly to be sure that any balloons overhead are able to get out of the way.

I turned back to the people on the ground and called, "The captain compliments the crew." For a second it was like George was there beside me saying the words. Then I felt the burner control in my hand and Judy laid her hand on top of my other hand on the edge of the gondola. People waved and a pilot from another balloon called to us and held his fist with a thumbs-up sign.

As we ascended it became obvious how large the crowd was. From 100 feet people looked like ants on a busy hill. We had launched from about the middle of the field. By the time we reached the edge of the field, we could see other balloons in the third wave starting their cold inflation. I checked the balloons downwind from our position.

"Honey, there are two balloons about 150 feet above us," Judy said, pointing out their positions.

"Keep an eye on them and tell me when they have cleared us."

"How long do we have to stay at this altitude before we can go up?"

"See where the balloons ahead of us are climbing up?"

"Do you mean those about half a mile ahead?"

"Yes. When we reach that point we will have to wait until the balloons ahead of us have gone up and crossed back north over the top of us. Then we can ascend and roll back along with the rest of them."

There was some danger involved in this maneuver. If a balloon heading south ascended too quickly, it could collide with a balloon coming back north over the field. Once we had made the climb, we would have to watch carefully for any balloons coming up underneath us.

As we neared the leading edge of the pack of balloons, the balloon ahead of us started up. We watched until we could see that he had cleared Sundancer and then we started our climb. I wanted to be high above the launch site when we crossed back over the field so we continued our climb until we were almost 1000 feet above the ground. The view was breathtaking. Balloons surrounded us in all directions. On the field below we could see more balloons climbing gently off the field and rolling up like a huge colorful wave to join us. Still more balloons were inflating on the ground, and the shapes and colors formed a crazy-quilt pattern against the brown desert. From this altitude people on the ground were almost invisible.

It took nearly thirty minutes to cross the launch site and fly far enough north to be able to descend safely. In all that time Judy and I said very little. Our eyes and our thoughts were occupied with a scene that we had never seen before and which would never, ever occur quite this way again. No matter how many times we would fly in this great event, this moment would be etched in our memories forever.

Finally we landed and exchanged passengers. The crew ran up to the gondola, filled with questions and stories about the fantastic pictures they had taken. We flew for almost another hour amid the beauty. Many times balloons were so close we could call to each other across the blue sky. Then, one-by-one our beautiful companions descended to the ground to be folded, packed and put away for another day. Too soon it was our turn. After we had packed Sundancer, we did not open the traditional bottle of champagne. Instead, we carefully uncorked a very expensive bottle of sparkling wine. As we passed the bottle from hand to hand, I looked at the faces of the crew. If there had ever been any question in my mind as to why I wanted to own a hot air balloon, it had vanished somewhere in the morning sky.